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# "To be Alive in Such an Age"



A Few Thoughts on the Reconstruction  
Task of the Christian Church

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## “To be Alive in Such an Age”

Never in our time, or perhaps in any other, have the lines of John Oxenham been more acutely pertinent to the actual human situation:

“The world is in the valley of decision.

It is standing at the parting of the ways.

Will it climb the steps of Heaven to realms Elysian

Or fall on horror of still darker days?”

Some people are depressed, overwhelmed, defeated by this momentous hour in history. Their faith, their courage is inadequate. But others share in the exultant mood of Angela Morgan when she sings:

“To be alive in such an age—

With every year a lightning page

Turned in the world's great wonder book . . .

When miracles are everywhere

And every inch of common air

Throbs a tremendous prophecy

Of greater marvels yet to be.”

Yes, there are miracles everywhere. We recoil in horror from miracles of destructive power which stagger the imagination. But these same energies can be transmuted into miracles of creative potency. These conquests of nature are now in man's puny hands and under the control of his heart and mind, for good or evil. He alone may choose the future and bring it to pass.

And there are also miracles of spiritual opportunity—matched by the miracle of spiritual resources. I now speak especially of Europe—what was known in military parlance as E.T.O.—The European Theatre of Operations—in the life of the Christian Church. Now I do not know what genius devised the fascinating insignia worn on their shoulder patches by our fighting men. Some of them are prosaic, some amusing, some intriguing. But on the shoulders of General Eisenhower and

the men about him at SHAEF, the insignia consisted of a sword and a rainbow. Whether intentional or not, there is a meaningful parable in that dual sign.

There is little need to review what the sword stood for in those dark months and years before victory came; the sword of righteousness and retribution caused its damage as did the sword of aggression and iniquity. Those of us who have not experienced it can hardly believe the physical destruction wrought upon towns and countryside. My own son who fought with Patton's Army across Germany wrote that without actually seeing it, it would be incomprehensible. And then think of the untold millions of the dead—in battles or horror camps or along the dismal highways where trudged the pitiful processions of refugees. Add to them, the mutilated or half starved bodies of other millions, living souvenirs of a monstrous reign of terror. Nor is this all, for the sword is responsible for the moral chaos which has engulfed so many, and which will be harder to repair than blasted buildings or undernourished bodies. As the Lord Bishop of Chichester, Dr. Bell, said in addressing the British House of Lords, at war's end we cannot merely turn a page and start fresh on a clean new chapter. There are moral scars and ethical confusions that it will take years if not generations to erase. One thinks of that brave young Hollander, a Christian minister, a fearless leader of the underground, who had numerous identification papers and disguises, and had to live and serve his nation by deceit and trickery. He had a spiritual stamina that could endure such a strain. But not all have come through so well. One reads with dismay of the thousands of young French girls returning from labor assignments in Germany, nearly all of them pregnant or with a baby or two, and many of them diseased. We are told that a large proportion of them, with no hope for any future, are being absorbed in the white slave trade which always flourishes during and after a war. Then there are the young lads who have been the agents of the black market, making money like gangsters, and growing up with no disciplines or

restraints of any sort, save only expediency and profit. All these are among the ghastly works of the sword.

But there is another side to the picture—the other half of the symbol—a rainbow over Europe, a rainbow of truth, of fidelity, of courage, of hope for a better world. And that rainbow is The Christian Faith and The Christian Church. In the words of Dr. Visser 't Hooft, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches:

“In the great struggle which has been going on in Europe the church has gained a new prestige. For in this fundamentally spiritual conflict the churches of the occupied countries have proved to be the loyal guardians of the great spiritual values and, as the underground press has often put it, the conscience of the nation . . . In the chaotic situation of Europe today where so many institutions have been wholly or partly destroyed, the churches represent one of the very few remaining coherent bodies which are ready for the reconstruction task.”

But let us not be content with a generalization, even from so competent an authority. Let us look at direct reports and documents to see if that judgment of hopefulness is valid. To begin at the top of the map, here is a communication from Finland from the Bishop of Oulu. He writes of the terrible destruction, particularly of an area in length approximately the distance from the south coast of England to Edinburgh and in width from London to Hull. He names the towns looted and burned by the Germans. There is the mark of the sword. But here is the rainbow—“notwithstanding, great ‘novements of religious revival have taken place among these poor but heroic people and renewed their moral standard.”

The story of Norway is better known—the way in which the Christian Congregations defied their Nazi conquerors, and when their ministers were arrested and their churches closed, stood outside facing the bayonets and tommyguns of the storm troopers to sing—“A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.” Faith must mean a good deal when it is put to such a test and stands firm.

We have all read of Bishop Berggrav who was imprisoned so long, but whose Christian courage and character were so rugged and so radiant, that his Nazi guards were touched by it, and he was able to maintain contacts with his friends and even at times to go outside and meet with members of the underground. He, and others like him have added lustre to the rainbow in the Norwegian sector.

The story of the Christian fortitude and endurance of the church in Holland is another bright spot on the horizon. One of the most thrilling documents of our time is a little collection of some of the declarations prepared by the synodical leaders and bravely uttered from many of the pulpits of that little land that has suffered so much. These pronouncements, in the heroic effort to maintain the laws of God in the life of men, as against the rules and edicts of a perverted human philosophy, were often by way of invitation to arrest and even torture and death. Twelve of the Protestant pastors of Holland did die for their faith, in prisons or concentration camps. But their very martyrdom lifted high before the nation the reality of the Christian faith and the eternal significance of the Christian way as the only true basis for living.

Even in France, where the Evangelical faith has never seemed to be particularly influential, we find amazing evidences of spiritual quickening emerging from all the suffering and tribulations of the war. Among the heroes of this land one must name Pastor Marc Boegner, President of the Federation of Protestant Churches. He was in the very forefront of the resistance movement, and held such a place in the esteem of his countrymen, Catholic and atheist as well as Protestant, that the Germans dared not molest him, although they persistently sought to entrap him in some incriminating involvement. When early in the occupation the authorities invited him to a dinner in his honor, hoping that their blandishments might soften his spirit of defiance, he sent back a blazing message: "So long as my colleagues are in prison for their faith, I will not sit down at meat with their captors." And again, when they tried to



force him to sign a protest to the allied governments against the bombing of German cities, he replied: "the Huguenot Church of France signs no documents at the behest of any military authorities." Is it any wonder then, that an American Navy Chaplain, after visiting him in Paris shortly after it was liberated, and hearing a stirring sermon on the challenge of the Christian, writes of the way in which the people of France were looking to Dr. Boegner as typifying that which held the only promise for their new world, and turning to the church as never before as the one stable and victorious factor in the midst of defeat and confusion?

Another illustrious name is that of Mlle. Madeleine Barot, the moving spirit of CIMADE (Comité Inter-Mouvements Auprès des Evacués.) Under the inspiration and personal leadership of this young woman, CIMADE came into being as a Christian underground, drawing into its activities youth from such organizations as the YMCA, YWCA, Student Christian Federation, etc. Their secret activities were first primarily on behalf of the unfortunate people in the concentration camps and other refugees and evacuees. They helped in numberless smuggled exits over the border. They hid children and adults. They assisted escaped prisoners of war and Allied airmen who were shot down. All of this was carried on under "the constraint of Christ" and at infinite risk of life itself. Now that France has been liberated, CIMADE has come into the open, and is recognized as an efficient arm of the church in its relief work and evangelism. It operates a dozen or more foyers, or barracks, in devastated towns or cities, where people may gather, and find a pulsing Christian fellowship to serve as a nucleus for the rehabilitation of community life. And the religious emphasis is never lacking for hymn sings, Bible study groups, and preaching services are part of the program. Here is indeed another aspect of the rainbow that is over Europe.

In Italy, we discover a similar situation, the Protestant Church groups, though constituting but a minute percentage of the population, exercising an influence far out of proportion

to their numbers. The Waldensian and other Evangelical pastors were among the heroic leaders of resistance to the pagan philosophies of both Fascism and Nazism, being oppressed by both these forces in turn, and suffering many hardships in addition to the inevitable destructiveness of war. Nevertheless they emerged stronger in their faith and higher in the esteem of their countrymen. The scattered congregations face the future with courage and confidence, relying on the promises of God as they have been tested and proved in the experiences of persecution and war.

So one might continue the roster of countries—Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Greece. And in Germany itself, although the picture is still confused, there are multiplying evidences of fidelity on the part of leaders and laymen that give promise for the future of the Christian Church as a creative and a conditioning influence in the life of the new German nation. It can all be summed up as overwhelming evidence of the persisting power of the Gospel of Christ Jesus to hold men through difficulties and point the way forward in righteousness and service. It is because of these facts, that, despite all the chaos and despair, all the immorality and recklessness and defeatism, we can still say that there is a rainbow of hope over Europe.

But all of this leads to another point, the challenge to the rest of us, who have not suffered so sorely, who have had our casualty lists but who have not felt the hard foot of the conqueror upon our necks, whose cities have not been levelled, whose countryside has not been laid waste and sown with a deadly harvest of mines, whose losses in every category have been so light in comparison. There is first of all a challenge to demonstrate a like faith and high resolution as we look ahead. If there is no virtue in suffering as such, we must give evidence that we too can live courageously and with consecration to our Master, Jesus Christ.

Equally insistent is the call to serve in the spirit of the Good Samaritan, binding up the wounds of our fellows, and



sharing of our substance for their rehabilitation. It is here that the World Council of Churches offers a ready channel of fellowship and service. This organization which was in process of formation when war broke out over the world unites some 90 different church bodies in 29 countries. It has accepted responsibility for leadership in the task of rehabilitating the church life of the devastated areas. It has set up at general headquarters in Geneva a Department of Reconstruction and Interchurch Aid with an international staff including a group of Americans. This Department works with Reconstruction Committees in both the "giving" and the "receiving" countries, listing the needs and allocating the requests for assistance and then administering the aid which is already reaching very substantial figures. In the United States, the Commission for World Council Service is the special agency through which the 24 cooperating denominations are making this contribution to the comprehensive World Council program in addition to what is done directly in relief, and in gifts to sister churches or other church related programs.

The plans of the World Council for re-establishing and strengthening church activities in Europe fall under numerous headings. Of immediate importance is the restoration to leadership of the ministers. As indicated above, they have suffered disproportionately, and with the destruction of so many thousands of churches and parsonages, have lost all their possessions. They need not only shelter, food and clothes, but books, means of transport and in many instances a period of physical recuperation to fit them for their tasks.

Another immediate need is for wooden barracks to be used as temporary church shelters where services may be held and parishional activities started again. The Commission for World Council Service has forwarded funds for more than three score of these wooden buildings, to be erected in France, Holland, and Germany.

The plea for Christian literature is also very urgent. It is hard for us to realize what an utter dearth of reading matter

exists on the continent, deliberate burnings of Bibles and religious books having been added to the general destruction of libraries and warehouses. The reprinting of important works has already started in Sweden and Switzerland. America and England are also planning to provide thousands of volumes. Religious periodicals, pamphlets, and study material are being made available and are most eagerly received.

Long range plans also include help in the training of a new generation of leaders both lay and clerical. This means the reopening of theological schools and training centers, and in many cases the awarding of scholarship grants for study in their own schools or in England, Scotland, or America.

The various evangelistic programs, which are so successfully appealing to the multitudes whose hearts have been stirred by the war experience must be strengthened and multiplied. This unique opportunity to reach the masses with the gospel of Jesus Christ is a tremendous challenge to all of us. Dr. Visser 't Hooft writes that "we have now perhaps the greatest opportunity since the Reformation to confront Europe with the gospel, and the whole course of history in the next few decades may well depend on this."

There is also the great burden of assistance to the hundreds of thousands of refugees. Church philanthropy cannot be expected to care for this problem in its entirety. Mass feedings and the provision of housing, clothes, and transportation for resettlement must be governmental projects. Church people want to help, and are helping magnificently in the sending of food supplies, clothing, bedding and shoes, to supplement in a measure the inadequacies of other programs. But in addition to such gifts of material aid, there are special services of counsel and relief which the churches have been rendering and which must continue into a long future.

Finally—although we have not covered all the needs—there is the well nigh overwhelming task of rebuilding the churches themselves—the thousands of edifices which have been completely leveled or damaged beyond repair. This is by and large a task to which the parishes themselves must devote their

thought and resources, as conditions become more normal. But we who still have undamaged churches wherein to worship God surely want to help generously in the re-erecting of temples of faith to be everywhere the symbols of eternal values as well as the active centers of Christian living.

All of these opportunities add up to a thrilling invitation to us as church men and women to express our unity in the bonds of—not only an abstract love but also very substantial contributions. We have indeed vast resources concerning which we must demonstrate ourselves to be good and faithful stewards.

The many denominational programs throughout the country include the above projects among others in their plans for these immediate post-war years. Much will be done by direct contacts, and much under the coordinated scheme of all the churches working together to meet whatever needs there are whenever they exist and whatever the organizational connections. Every individual Christian is urged to give as generously as possible, through his own church, in support of its wholehearted participation in both the denominational and interdenominational reconstruction efforts. The united program of the World Council Service Commission alone—the American Branch—calls for a minimum of \$3,585,000 for the year 1945-6 and a total of \$8,980,000 for four years. Helping to underwrite this program is one way in which everyone of us can have a part in restoring normal life in Europe and reestablishing it on a stable foundation of Christian faith and practice.

“Only have vision and bold enterprise.  
No task too great for men of unsealed eyes.  
The future stands with outstretched hands.  
Press on and claim its high supremacies.”

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*Inquiries concerning the work of the Reconstruction program of the World Council of Churches should be addressed to:*

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